

SPECIAL FEATURE (4 OF 12)
RAY KABAKER/LOS ANGELES

FEBRUARY 1, 1978

ACADEMY SPECIAL #4 -- THE WRITER: MICHAEL BLANKFORT
(VOICED PIECE, INSERTS AND INTERVIEW IN TAPE
LIBRARY)

VOICE: THIS APRIL OF 1978, THE AMERICAN FILM INDUSTRY IS MARKING THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE "OSCAR" -- THE GOLDEN STATUETTE AWARDED EACH YEAR FOR OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE VARIOUS ARTS AND CRAFTS OF FILM MAKING. IN COOPERATION WITH THE ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES, VCA IS PRESENTING A SERIES OF SPECIAL INTERVIEWS WITH PROMINENT HOLLYWOOD FILM MAKERS -- ALL ACADEMY AWARD WINNERS. TODAY: THE WRITER -- NEW PRESTIGE FOR THE FORGOTTEN MAN.

TAPE: CUT ONE -- BLANKFORT

"MORE AND MORE WRITERS ARE BECOMING DIRECTORS, WHICH MEANS THAT THEY ARE REALLY FILM MAKERS. THEY NOT ONLY WRITE THE SCRIPT, THEY ARE GOING TO DIRECT IT, CAST IT, THE WHOLE BUSINESS. WHICH MAKES THEM TRULY THE AUTHOR OF THE FILM, UNLIKE THE FRENCH FICTION OF THE 'AUTEUR' THEORY WHICH MADE THE DIRECTOR THE AUTHOR, ELIMINATING COMPLETELY THE VIEW THAT THE WRITER HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE FILM. NOWADAYS I BELIEVE THAT WRITERS CONSIDER THEMSELVES MORE AND MORE AUTHORS (OF FILMS)."

VOICE: MICHAEL BLANKFORT, SEVENTY YEARS OLD, CAME TO HOLLYWOOD BY WAY OF LEGITIMATE THEATRE. HIS FILM CREDITS, SPANNING FORTY YEARS, INCLUDE SEVERAL WESTERNS -- PERHAPS THE MOST ENDURING HOLLYWOOD VEHICLE -- ONE OF WHICH EARNED HIM AN OSCAR NOMINATION. HIS PERSPECTIVE ON THE WRITER'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MOVIE ALSO COMES FROM HIS ACTIVITY AS AN EXECUTIVE WITH THE SCREEN WRITERS GUILD OVER THE YEARS, AND AS A BOARD MEMBER OF THE ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES. HE HAS ALSO WRITTEN A DOZEN BOOKS, MOSTLY NOVELS. HIS POINT ABOUT WRITERS BEING DIFFERENT FROM AUTHORS IS ROOTED IN HOLLYWOOD'S HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT -- FROM THE DAYS WHEN THE PRODUCER RODE ROUGHSHOD OVER THE SUFFERING WRITERS.

TAPE: CUT THREE -- BLANKFORT

"THEY HAVE FOR MANY, MANY DECADES BEEN LOW MAN ON THE TOTEM POLE. ON THE WHOLE, WE HAVE RARELY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY OF SELECTING MATERIALS. WE HAVE BEEN, SO TO SPEAK, THE UNDER-DOG TO THE PRODUCER, THE DIRECTOR AND, OF COURSE, MOSTLY THE STAR. OVER THE YEARS, NO MATTER WHAT THE PRODUCER HAS SAID ABOUT HOW IMPORTANT THE WORD WAS, HOW IMPORTANT THE STORY AND CHARACTERIZATIONS, NEVERTHELESS, THE WRITER WAS THE FORGOTTEN MAN. HE NEVER GOT THE CREDIT HE DESERVED. PEOPLE WOULD KNOW THE EDITOR OF A FILM, BUT RARELY KNOW THE WRITER. THIS HAS BEEN THE PAST. NOW WE'RE COMING TO A DIFFERENT PERIOD IN FILM WRITING. WRITERS HAVE FOUND THEIR STRENGTH IN A WAY. THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, WHICH HAS FOR ITS MEMBERS ABOUT THREE THOUSAND TELEVISION AND FILM WRITERS, OVER THE YEARS THROUGH STRIKES AND THROUGH ALL KINDS OF CAREFUL PREPARATIONS, HAS NOW REACHED THE PLACE WHERE WE HAVE CONSIDERABLE STRENGTH, AND CONTRACTS WITH THE PRODUCERS ARE PRETTY STRONG CONTRACTS.

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THAT IS, HAVING TO DO WITH CREDIT AND ARBITRATION. THERE USED TO BE A TIME WHEN THE PRODUCER WOULD DECIDE WHAT WRITER WOULD GET WHAT CREDIT. NOW THIS CAN'T BE DONE ANYMORE. WE HAVE OUR PROTECTIONS AND OUR SERVICES. THIS HAS GIVEN WRITERS A SENSE OF THEIR OWN ESTEEM, A SENSE OF THEIR OWN STATUS. THEY TAKE THEMSELVES MUCH MORE SERIOUSLY, AND THEY WON'T DO THINGS ANYMORE THAT JUST MAY BE IN SOME KIND OF CONTRADICTION TO THEIR VIEWS ABOUT LIFE, OR THEY DON'T THINK IT'S IMPORTANT ENOUGH, OR ONE THING OR ANOTHER. SO I THINK WE'VE ENTERED A PERIOD IN HOLLYWOOD WHERE THE WRITER -- HE'S NOT KING YET; HE MAY NEVER BE KING, BUT HE IS SLOWLY APPROACHING THE ROYAL THRONE."

VOICE: PERHAPS MORE THAN ANY OTHER CONTRIBUTOR TO A FILM, THE SCREEN WRITER MUST COMBINE ART WITH CRAFT -- COMBINING THE LITERARY SKILLS OF A NOVELIST AND PLAYWRIGHT WITH THE TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS OF THE CAMERA. ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO STANDARD APPROACH, THE PROCESS USUALLY INVOLVES AN OUTLINE OR "TREATMENT" OF THE STORY, WHICH MAY GO THROUGH SEVERAL VERSIONS BEFORE A FINAL SHOOTING SCRIPT -- PERHAPS 125 PAGES -- IS PRODUCED. IT DOESN'T ALWAYS WORK THAT WAY. LEGEND HAS IT THAT SIDNEY HOWARD, THE PLAYWRIGHT WHO ADAPTED "GONE WITH THE WIND" TO THE SCREEN, WORKED FROM A SERIES OF SMALL INDEX CARDS THAT HE KEPT RE-WRITING DURING FILMING. WHAT ABOUT CONTENT

VOICE: AND CONSCIENCE? IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A SCREEN WRITER
(CONT) PHILOSOPHY?

TAPE: CUT FOUR -- BLANKFORT

"THE OLD CLICHE IS, 'IF YOU WANT TO SEND A MESSAGE, SEND A TELEGRAM.' THAT IS, THE PRODUCERS IN THE OLD STUDIOS BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT THAT BY DEFINITION A MESSAGE FILM DIDN'T WANT MESSAGE FILMS WAS SOMETHING THAT COULD NOT POSSIBLY BE ENTERTAINMENT. NOW, WE HAVE, I THINK, A DIFFERENT VIEW. LOOK: OUR FIRST RESPONSIBILITY IS TO HAVE AN AUDIENCE. THERE'S NO POINT IN WRITING A FILM, PRODUCING A FILM AND SPENDING TWO, THREE, FOUR MILLION DOLLARS AND THEN PLAY IT TO EMPTY THEATRES. THOSE WHO PUT THE MONEY IN HAVE TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT WILL BE IT BE A COMMERCIAL SUCCESS? AND NOT EVERY WRITER CAN AFFORD TO BUCK THAT SYSTEM. BUT I THINK IT CAN TRULY BE SAID THAT THE WRITER INTENDS AND WOULD HOPE FOR, AND GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY WOULD ACCOMPLISH, THE KIND OF FILM THAT WOULD EXPRESS HIS COMMITMENT TOWARD LIFE AND SOCIETY -- ALWAYS IN TERMS OF COMMUNICATION, ALWAYS IN TERMS THAT PEOPLE WOULD ENJOY AND FEEL RESPONSIVE TO. WE HAVEN'T YET REACHED THE POINT THE EUROPEANS HAVE REACHED. BUT WE'RE ON OUR WAY. AND AS WE HAVE DEVELOPED AN AUDIENCE -- AND THIS IS TERRIBLY IMPORTANT: I THINK OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS, AND PERHAPS THE RESULT OF THE SIXTIES AND PERHAPS THE RESULT OF VIETNAM AND THE DISRUPTION OF OUR NATIONAL LIFE, I THINK WE ARE DEVELOPING SPECIAL AUDIENCES WHO ARE NOW TIRED OF THE OLD STUFF ON TELEVISION, WHO ARE NOW LOOKING FOR SOMETHING EXTRA. THERE ARE AUDIENCES EVEN FOR WAY OUT AVANT GARDE FILMS, EVEN WITH FILMS THAT DEAL RADICALLY WITH SOCIAL PROBLEMS, AND THESE AUDIENCES MAY BE LARGE ENOUGH NOW TO, SO TO SPEAK, PAY OFF THE INVESTMENT OF MAKING THE FILM."

VOICE: MISTER BLANKFORT SAYS THAT TELEVISION, AMONG ITS MANY OTHER INFLUENCES ON FILMS AND AMERICAN SOCIETY IN GENERAL, IS BRINGING MORE WRITERS INTO THE DIRECTING AND PRODUCING EXPERIENCE, A DEVELOPMENT HE FEELS IS BOUND TO HAVE AN IMPACT ON MOVIES AS THESE YOUNG WRITERS EXPAND THEIR HORIZONS.

TAPE: CUT FIVE BLANKFORT

"MORE AND MORE WRITERS IN TELEVISION ARE BECOMING PRODUCERS AND DIRECTORS, NOT ONLY OF THEIR OWN MATERIAL BUT ALSO OF MATERIAL OF OTHER WRITERS. WITH THIS KIND OF TRAINING, OF KNOWING ALL THE TECHNIQUE OF PUTTING TOGETHER A PRODUCTION IN TELEVISION, I SUSPECT THAT IN A LITTLE WHILE THERE WILL BE A WHOLE NEW CROP OF FILMMAKERS WHO THINK OF THEMSELVES PRIMARILY AS WRITERS. AND THIS IS TERRIBLY IMPORTANT: WHERE A

TAPE: WRITER IS ALSO A DIRECTOR, A PRODUCER, THE QUESTION IS,
(CONT) WHAT DOES HE THINK OF HIMSELF AS? IF HE THINKS OF HIMSELF AS
A WRITER, THAT'S THE EMPHASIS THAT HE'LL GIVE TO THE
PRODUCTION."

VOICE: SOME THOUGHTS ON WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH WRITERS IN AMERICAN
FILMS TODAY, FROM MICHAEL BLANKFORT.

THIS HAS BEEN ANOTHER
IN A SERIES OF SPECIAL REPORTS BASED ON CONVERSATIONS WITH
AMERICAN FILM MAKERS ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY
OF "OSCAR," THE ANNUAL AWARD OF THE ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE
ARTS AND SCIENCES.

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